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SIPDIS

FOR SCA/P

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/03/2029  
TAGS: PARM PREL MARR SMIG PK BU  
SUBJECT: MI-17 HELOS AVAILABLE BUT MOST REQUIRE

REFURBISHMENT

REF: SECSTATE 55654

Classified By: Ambassador McElroy for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Bulgarian Armed Forces currently possess 12 MI-17 helicopters, only three of which are in flying condition. The remaining nine require approximately USD 10 million (per airframe) of repair and upgrades to be fully mission capable. Since early 2008, Bulgaria has been in discussions with NATO on a deal to refurbish (using funds provided by other NATO members) two of its non-operational MI-17s that would then be deployed to Afghanistan and piloted by Bulgarian crews in support of ISAF operations. To our knowledge, no formal decision has been made by NATO on this offer. To date Bulgaria has not considered sale, lease or donation of its helicopters, but we believe it would likely agree to donation or sale of up to two of its non-operational MI-17s to Pakistan. Bulgaria would most likely not be willing to donate any of its three fully operational MI-17s, but it would consider offers for sale or lease. END SUMMARY.

Status of the Aircraft

¶2. (C) In November 2008, a NATO team visited Sofia to assess the state of Bulgaria's MI-17s. The team found that at twenty-one years of age, Bulgaria's nine non-operational helicopters would require substantial repairs and overhauls to become fully mission ready. Terem, a state-owned Bulgarian company, estimates the required investment would be approximately USD 10 million per airframe. (Terem is not known for competitive pricing, so it is possible another company could do the work more cheaply.)

¶3. (C) According to a NATO report, the repair and upgrades would take approximately 12 months and would extend the life of each helicopter by seven years and 1,000 flying hours. These preliminary quotations do not include cockpit or fuselage ballistic protection or upgraded engines, which may be required for operations in heavy combat or at high-altitudes. (The full text of this NATO report will be emailed to SCA/P.)

Transfer Options

¶4. (C) The Bulgarians have plans for 10 of their 12 MI-17s. The three operational helicopters and three of the non-operational helos will be kept by the Ministry of Defense. Four non-operational helos will be re-outfitted for

rescue and relief operations and provided to the Ministry of Emergency Situations. The remaining two non-operational helos are available for sale or donation.

¶ 15. (C) The simplest option would be to ask Bulgaria to donate these two non-operational MI-17s to Pakistan. The Bulgarian Government would likely agree to this, though they may seek some form of compensation, such as agreement to refurbish or upgrade other helicopters. Such a deal might also negate or complicate Bulgaria's offer to provide two MI-17s to NATO for ISAF operations in Afghanistan, so the relative needs of the two missions should be weighed. It is possible the Bulgarians would consider donation of non-operational helos to both Afghanistan and Pakistan, but to date they have not offered more than two helicopters, and that offer has been conditional on substantial and costly upgrades. They might be persuaded to donate more (for instance, two to Pakistan and two to Afghanistan), but this would likely require some sort of incentive for the Bulgarian side, such as a deal to purchase the aircraft or an agreement to provide U.S. or NATO funds to refurbish Bulgaria's other helicopters.

¶ 16. (C) Bulgaria possesses three fully operational MI-17s, but as they have so few, they are reluctant to part with them. They have made no offer of these aircraft, but we believe Bulgaria would be willing to seriously consider a sale or lease deal, if presented with an attractive proposal.

¶ 17. (C) COMMENT: With national elections just over four weeks away, it will become increasingly difficult for the Bulgarian government to make complicated or controversial political decisions. If a clear and direct request is made soon, (either for donation of non-operational helos or an attractive offer for sale or lease of operational aircraft), it might be possible for the Bulgarians to move forward in the relatively tight time window before elections. Otherwise, a final decision would have to wait until after a new government is formed, likely in August.  
McEldowney